

RECENT SCIENTIFIC PROGRESS

Psychiatry and Crime

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CRIME and disease cause so much grief, waste and suffering in the world that every step toward their alleviation should be received with acclamation. But the world is often blind. For physical hurts it welcomes the surgeon's sharp knife or the ill-tasting pill. For broken legs ambulance bells clang. For broken minds and twisted characters there is little cure and no prophylaxis. The public does not truly believe in the evil power of mind over actions; it is only beginning to be acclimated to scientific medicine for its physical body. The gigantic problem of human behavior is the concern of the psychiatrist. Not all of us need his attention. Institutions for the mentally diseased are brought to mind by the word "psychiatry." Because there are so many who are slightly, incipiently, mentally queer, the specialist in psychiatry is coming to play a more important part in the ordinary policing of human behavior that has heretofore been the concern of policeman, Judge and lawyer.

When the American Psychiatric Association met at Minneapolis a committee reported that the horrible Hickman murder of last Winter could have been prevented. The report declared: "Had Hickman been examined after his earlier crimes, had he been given an examination when he was arrested for forgery, he would almost certainly have been found to be possessed of psychopathological indications to an extent indicating confinement and observation. In this way the spectacular murder, which made him infamous, would have been prevented."

Of importance to every parent whose own child may be the victim of such future crimes is the following statement by the committee: "It is a curious paradox that psychiatrists who are desirous of preventing crime by examining the personality make-up of offenders are not called at the time when the premonitory symptoms of social maladjustment are exhibited but only after the extreme, violent, irretrievable explo-

sions have occurred. Your committee feels that it might be helpful in making clear the attitude of psychiatrists if we pointed out that it is our wish and proposal that we be called not merely when the major crimes have been committed but when minor crimes have been committed, in order that major crimes may be anticipated and provisions made to prevent their occurrence." The introduction of the question of insanity at the Hickman trial by the defense lawyers was termed by the committee report an "unfortunate and regrettable fiasco," which "retarded the cause of psychiatry in the courts."

What appears to be an extraordinary miscarriage of justice was cited by the committee as evidence of the necessity of submitting witnesses as well as accused to mental examination. George Watters, an obscure and penniless negro of Sacramento, Cal., was convicted of murdering his wife and sentenced to be hanged, chiefly upon the testimony of his 9-year-old daughter. Only a few hours before the time for the execution the Governor commuted his sentence to life imprisonment because of new evidence secured and presented by a psychiatrist, Dr. Anita M. Muhl. It was revealed that no body was ever found and that the supposed deceased wife had been seen after the supposed crime walking on the streets of Los Angeles. Even more important was Dr. Muhl's observation that the negro's daughter was a hysterical and hypersuggestible individual whose testimony was self-contradictory and altogether unreliable.

Three Ohio murder cases were listed by the committee, of which Dr. Karl A. Menninger of Topeka, Kan., is Chairman, as illustrating the need of more psychiatry in the courts.

George Remus, accused wife murderer, although pronounced sane by a commission of psychiatrists, was declared insane by a jury. He has since been released from an Ohio hospital where he was detained.

Charles Lewis of Columbus, Ohio, a confessed murderer, although declared sane by a commission of experts, was later judged not guilty because of insanity. The Velma West case, the committee report stated, concerns a murder in which an inferred homosexual relationship was implied to have moved the court to special consideration of the mental factors in the crime and the accused was allowed to plead guilty to a second degree murder charge.

Only one out of ten courts has a psychiatrist attached to its staff, but four out of ten courts make it a habit to refer suspected cases to private physicians for mental examination before trial. One-third of the public penal institutions of the country employ psychiatrists, a similar proportion employ psychologists, and half of them refer suspected prisoners to experts. Encouraging testimony of the growing acceptance of the psychiatric attitude toward crime is contained in recent recommendations of the National Crime Commission.

Psychiatrists applaud the attitude of the lawyers and other leaders in crime control who recommend that every person charged with a crime be studied by impartial experts cooperating with the courts. Psychiatrists consider court duels between members of their profession deplorable and ineffective. When a lay jury delivers summary punishment to a criminal or liberates a dangerous character, neither the criminal nor society is done justice. In past years the American Psychiatric Association has urged the nation-wide adoption of laws such as are now in force in Massachusetts and Colorado. In those States the psychiatrist studies and reports on the accused before the trial, the jury passes on the facts of the crime, not the criminal, and the court renders its verdict of preventive rather than vindictive justice. Reform of the criminal code along these lines is urged by the National Crime Commission.

The new psychiatry reaches far beyond the asylum, jail or courtroom. The experience and technique of the mental expert can be applied with success to the irascible employe, the retarded school child, the persistent petty thief, the compulsive drinker and the multitude of other unhappy individuals who do not find themselves in step with society. Eventually it will not be nec-

essary for the community to wait until crimes of certain sorts are committed before detecting the potential criminal. Experience and tests will allow the person with criminal tendencies to be spotted in early life at a time when his destructive tendencies can be corrected or curbed.

The retarded or mentally defective child who has such a hard time in school has three times as many brothers and sisters as the brilliant, gifted child. Three times out of four, the defective child has a foreign-born mother. For the first time in the history of this country definite information on the origin and cause of the mentally defective has been gathered as the result of thorough examination of over 10,000 Massachusetts retarded school children by Dr. Neil A. Dayton of that State's Health Department. The feeble-minded do not tend to be the first child of the family. This finding will allow the eldest of the family to heave a sigh of relief. The feeble-minded do not tend to be the last child of the family. The baby of the family will be glad to know this. But another current idea, that mental deficiency travels the same road as largeness of family, was substantiated by Dr. Dayton's studies. He found the average size of families which contained the dunces of the Massachusetts public school to be three times the size of families in which gifted children appeared. Argument for restriction of immigration is contained in Dr. Dayton's observation that, whereas less than half of the mothers in the towns surveyed were foreign-born, three-quarters of the mentally defective children were born of mothers not native to the United States.

In Massachusetts the child who cannot keep up with its class is not shoved over in the corner with a conical cap on its head. In fact, such treatment of retarded children has become exceedingly bad practice in practically all enlightened schools. In Massachusetts when a child is so retarded that it loses three grades it is compulsory by law that it be given a rigorous psychiatric examination. In the last thirteen years over 30,000 children have been examined in this way, and now fifteen traveling school clinics under Dr. Dayton's direction are testing 5,000 children a year. From the records thus obtained Dr. Dayton now has

the first opportunity in medical history to study the cause and peculiarity of the conditions that give rise to the mentally defective who are so often a burden to themselves and society.

NEW THEORY OF HABIT FORMATION

One of the most important papers read before the recent annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, at Nashville, presented a new theory of how habits are formed and how they may be cured. Dr. Knight Dunlap, Professor of Psychology at Johns Hopkins University, advanced the idea that bad habits, such as stammering, biting finger nails or using a slang phrase can be overcome by voluntarily doing the undesirable thing.

This method is somewhat reminiscent of the experience that every mother has had with her children. Sometimes a mother tells a child not to do a certain thing, but the child disobeys, for the forbidden is often desirable. On the other hand, if mother indicates to the child that she is not particularly concerned whether or not he does what she does not wish him to do sometimes he will not do it. The psychologist first tried the habit cure on himself. To break up the habit of writing "hte" on the typewriter for "the," he set to work deliberately and wrote half a page, single spaced, of the "hte" combination, with the thought in mind that this was a "word" that he would not write in the future, unless it was done deliberately. About a week later he put in a second practice period, writing about one-third of a page. Subsequently, in a period of three months, the error of typing has not occurred, even once. The theory is being tested with stammerers in a public school with favorable results. In the case of stammerers the vital point is to study the specific type of stammering and then induce the patient to reproduce voluntarily his characteristic verbal performance, criticizing and assisting him until his voluntary stammering is as nearly as possible like his involuntary. From that point on the technique is complicated, and it is not expected that it will be perfected until many cases have been experimentally subjected to it. Thumb-

sucking and similar wrong habits of two and three year-old children have been treated at the Child Institute of Johns Hopkins University with results that show the method is useful even at such early ages. In all cases patients have been selected who desired to cure the bad habit for one reason or another and have been carefully instructed that the voluntary performance under the experimenter's control would assist in abolishing the undesirable behavior at other times. Dr. Dunlap's theory is in opposition to the generally accepted theory that repeating an act tends to fix it as a habit. He believes that repetition in itself is important only because it brings into play other factors which establish the habit. In experiments so far conducted it has been assumed that attention, expectation and desire are among the important factors in making and breaking habits.

EXTINGUISHING OIL FIRES

Every one knows or should know that water will not extinguish a gasoline fire, but two young chemists from Dayton, Ohio, Charles Allen Thomas and Carroll H. Hochwalt, have demonstrated that a dash of water containing the proper chemicals would put out a blazing fire of gasoline. The secret of their success is the solution in the water of a common salt of potassium. This new method of extinguishing oil fires is called a "catalytic effect" by the discoverers. Hitherto fire extinguishers have been based upon two well known principles, either smothering the fire by shutting out the oxygen of the air as by the use of carbon tetrachloride or cooling the combustible below the kindling temperature as by water. But the effect of this new form of fire extinguisher appears to depend upon the chemical composition of the salt dissolved in the water. The most efficient substances were found to be salts of the alkali metals, not merely potassium but still more the rare elements, rubidium and caesium. Salts containing an abundance of oxygen proved most effective. It is surprising to find chief among these chemical fire extinguishers potassium nitrate, which is an ingredient of gunpowder, and potassium chlorate which is employed in explosives.

